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Energy efficiency saves money and the planet

By Vicki Brown

Word&Way Correspondent

As fuel costs continue to rise, congregations look for ways to hold the line on energy costs so more money can be invested in their people and communities.

Churches of any size and locale can reduce energy costs in a number of ways. Some can be done at minimal or no cost. Others will require more time and a larger up-front expense.

- **Educate members.** Set aside time to discuss energy issues. Find or develop a Bible study about environmental issues for all age levels.
- **Brainstorm ways to trim costs without cutting ministry.** In other words, discuss facility usage based on ministry needs. Ask: How can we use our building more efficiently to save energy costs?
- **Survey area churches and businesses for energy-saving ideas.** What are others doing?
- **Conduct an energy audit.** An audit can be simple or extensive. Collect energy use information by reading meters and submeters or from utility bills.

Document usage by building (if the church has more than one) or by area. For example, the church needs to know how much energy is used in a family life center, in its office area, in the sanctuary, etc. Measure all energy usage (electricity, natural gas, propane and alternative fuels such as solar- or wind-generated power) in units and in cost per unit.

Set short- and long-term tracking periods. Short-term tracking will help the congregation determine changes that may need to be made. Long-term monitoring will help the church reach its energy goals.

- **Consider upgrading to a more efficient heating and air-conditioning system.** “The church will trade dollars upfront to save dollars in the long run,” said Larry Phillips of [Pellham Phillips Architects Engineers](#). He urged churches to be careful not to choose a system that is too complex. If the system is too sophisticated that it can’t be easily maintained, the church generally will not benefit.
- **Regularly maintain HVAC systems and replace filters.**
- **Install motion sensors to control lighting.** That way, lights will go off when the room or area is not being used.
- **Upgrade lighting fixtures and systems or replace bulbs with high-efficiency ones.** Compact fluorescent lights can save 30-40 percent.
- **Consider investing in alternative energy sources, such as solar power.**
- **Make use of daylight whenever possible and in as many locations in the facility as possible.**
- **Upgrade landscaping around the building to create shade on southern and western sides.**
- **Add insulation to walls and roof, if needed.**

“In churches, a large portion of the building is vacant and for a large part of the time,” Phillips said. “The key is to make sure the building is set up to take advantage of the dark time. It should be a normal part of the design.”

The Internet offers a wealth of information on energy conservation. One of the most extensive sites is the federal government’s Energy Star site at www.energystar.gov. The site offers information for residential and commercial buildings.

The Interfaith Power and Light sponsors Energy Federation (www.energyfederation.org), an online energy-efficiency store for faith communities.

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